

Let's Give the Public What It Wants

By Kenneth W. Outcalt

Several recent articles in the *JOURNAL* and the letters generated in response have had an underlying theme: "Foresters know what is best for the forest." Indeed, this undergirding assumption is pervasive among many foresters and often leads to conflicts with the public (A.W. Magill, "Barriers to Effective Communication," *J. For.* 89(10):16-18). It is apparent that the public is much more environmentally conscious and involved than in the past, and it expects professional foresters to exhibit the same level of environmental sensitivity. The idea that "if we educate people and show them what we are really doing, then they will support us" will only work if forest practices reflect what the public really desires. So let's be truthful and see how the public responds.

Although plantation forestry does provide many other resource values in addition to timber, this is not the whole story. We must also admit that plantations are less complex, i.e., they have lower biological diversity than natural forest ecosystems, and plantation forestry employs agronomic principles to maximize fiber production and profit at the expense of potential adverse impact to the environment. Professional foresters should not be ashamed of this or try to hide it. Rather, they should point out that, in spite of its consequences, plantation forestry is still the least environmentally damaging major land use: agriculture, transportation, housing, and urban development all have much greater environmental costs than does forestry.

This does not mean that improvements cannot be made. All managers should continually strive to find and employ techniques that have fewer adverse environmental repercussions. However, *plantation forestry is and will remain a sound and responsible system for producing the fiber that our society demands.*

It is quite obvious that most of the public does not think plantation forestry is appropriate for public lands. I believe the majority want public lands to serve as

a repository for maintaining the biological diversity of forest ecosystems. This means retaining all the genes and species in the community in their normal relative abundance and distribution over the landscape; it also means fostering the natural ecosystem structure and processes.

This does not mean locking up all public lands or eliminating fiber production. Rather, it means producing all out-



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puts by managing these lands with systems that more closely mimic, or at least produce the same results as, natural processes (for example, selection harvesting to imitate the small-scale disturbance of individual tree mortality that occurs in all forests; or clearcutting on only the temporal and physical scale that would occur in systems unaffected by humans).

Using present information, equations can be developed in conjunction with a GIS database to generate maps or lists of areas to be clearcut during a 10-year planning cycle. These would be based on estimates of the size and frequency of the larger-scale disturbances from fire, which occurs in nearly all forest types. Even with less-than-perfect data and models, this should provide a closer approximation of the natural disturbance regime than does the current system, which is based on a fixed rotation age.

If many of the native trees in a particular community type survive to 300-800 years, it is obvious that clearcutting and regenerating all stands on an 80- or 100-year rotation cannot produce natural conditions. Conversely, locking up the forest will also not produce natural conditions, because systems are not large enough to foster and allow natural fire to operate without management input.

This is what I think New Forestry for public lands is about. It is not pseudoscience, nor is it doing nothing. In fact, although it is designed to minimize environmental degradation, it will require a much higher level of management from natural resource professionals. It will necessitate more site-specific management prescriptions and less use of standard operating procedures. As such, it will be much more challenging and will finally allow foresters to apply the art and science of silviculture. I believe most professionals would welcome this opportunity; but even if they do not, this sort of approach is inevitable—because it is what people want, and no amount of "educating" will change their minds.

This does not mean that programs to educate the public about forestry are not needed; they are. However, they need to be an unbiased presentation of the facts, including areas of uncertainty—not "sales pitches." We cannot hope to regain public confidence if we are less than totally honest.

Most of us became professional foresters because of a genuine concern for the environment. We need to relay this to others. We also must listen to their concerns and desires. Education works both ways: people have been trying to give us feedback, but we haven't been doing a very good job of learning from them. ■

MY CHANCE articles are chosen by the editors for reasons of general interest. Opinions expressed are those of the author.—Ed.